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Englightenment in Philosophy and Religion

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Thank you to the Mortar Board Society for the privilege of addressing you this evening, and congratulations on your success at Butler University! When I was asked to prepare a "last lecture" for this evening two thoughts immediately occurred to me. The first was that the idea of sending you into your last semester of college with some words of wisdom seems like a daunting task, especially because you have no doubt heard so many excellent lectures during your time at Butler. But then I thought of another meaning of "last lecture," which forced me to consider what I myself would want to say if I only had one more lecture to give. What would I possibly have to say? How to distill into one short presentation a lifetime of thinking and living? That last piece gave me my angle: thinking and living. What is it that guides our thinking and living as people privileged to have enjoyed higher education? How does our thinking and living give us meaning and purpose?

I teach in the Department of Philosophy and Religion, and that is where I want to focus my remarks this evening. How can insights from philosophy and religion help us to live a meaningful life? Each of us, in our own way, is already a philosopher, even if we might not claim that title for ourselves, simply because we inevitably ask questions about the nature of reality, about the meaning and purpose of our lives, and about how we ought to live in the world. And many of us turn to religion to orient our lives, to give us this meaning and purpose, and to guide us in how we ought to live. Philosophy and religion share many common traits, but one theme that runs through both disciplines is enlightenment. Light and enlightenment feature prominently in many of the world's religious traditions. The quest for enlightenment is one that we have all shared by virtue of our common journey through education. In fact, it's no accident that the ancient symbol of education is a burning lamp, because wisdom casts an unquenchable light to dispel ignorance and fear. But what is this enlightenment that we all seek?

In my remarks I want to focus on two approaches to enlightenment that I find particularly meaningful and relevant for our times. There are many, many others, but I only have 20 minutes! Your career at Butler is nearing its end, and soon we will set you loose on the great big world out there. The world is a beautiful place, but it is also a dangerous place. We know this all too well. Joy and wonder are often marred by violence and fear. How can philosophy and religion guide us on the path of a life well-lived? How can these disciplines help us navigate this complex world and leave it a better place than we found it?

I want to focus on two seemingly disparate approaches to the question of enlightenment, one philosophical and the other religious. My representative of philosophy will be the great German philosopher, Immanuel Kant. My representative of religion will be Siddhartha Gautama, better known as the Buddha. Both figures are well-known specifically for what they taught us about enlightenment. One of Kant's most famous works is called "An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?" written in the late 18th century at the height of the philosophical movement we still call the Enlightenment. The title "Buddha" itself means "the enlightened one," so central is that theme to the life and teachings of Siddhartha and the millions of people around the world

who follow the Buddhist path. Though separated by almost 2500 years and half a world, both of these figures have much to teach us about the pursuit of enlightenment and the importance of wisdom for a life well-lived.

Kant lived in a rapidly changing world, much like our own. For generations before Kant's birth Europe had been devastated by religiously motivated wars, political turmoil, and oppression of the weak by the strong. It seemed to most observers that the future belonged to ignorance, intolerance, violence, and fear. Something needed to be done to reverse the course and provide hope. Kant, and his fellow philosophers, believed that what was needed was some common ground that everyone could share regardless of their very real differences. If we could find that common ground, then just maybe we would stop the killing and we would finally overcome our fear. The Enlightenment was born out of this deep desire to find such common ground, which the philosophers believed they found in reason, or what they often called "the natural light."

Kant wrote his essay on Enlightenment to encourage his contemporaries to put aside their differences – of nationality, of religion, of status – to discover what they shared in common. What he discovered is that so many of us live our lives in an attitude of fear: fear of the unknown, fear of being different, fear of being wrong, fear of thinking for ourselves. He said that we live our lives under a yoke, what he called "the yoke of immaturity." We do not exercise our natural gift of reason, preferring to let other people do our thinking for us. We do not take ownership of our own lives, preferring to follow rules that someone else has laid down for us, often against our own interests. Enlightenment, he said, consists in throwing off this yoke and daring to think for ourselves. *Sapere aude! Dare to you use your own reason!* was Kant's motto. We reach maturity by thinking for ourselves and determining our own destiny. Enlightenment, for Kant, is intellectual maturity, the pursuit of independence and human dignity. Only by thinking for ourselves, Kant thought, can we cast off fear and servility. Only by thinking for ourselves can we become the masters of our own lives. Only by thinking for ourselves can we hope to create a just society. Many of these lofty principles found expression in the founding documents of the United States, written as they were at the height of the Enlightenment.

But Kant wasn't one to be overly optimistic about our prospects. In his essay he asks and then answers an important question: "Do we live in an enlightened age?" he asks. "No," he replies, "but we live in an age of enlightenment." The difference is subtle but important. Enlightenment, for Kant, is not so much a goal to be obtained as it is a path to be pursued. We spend our entire lives on this quest for wisdom, ever mindful of the fact that there is always more to discover, more to experience, and more to learn. This is a helpful reminder for us to be humble in our assessment of our own wisdom, to remember that we aren't there just yet. And no, not even a college degree means that we have reached our goal. After all, there's a reason we call graduation "commencement": it is not the end of our learning and growth, but the beginning of the next stage of our journey toward enlightenment.

There is much wisdom in Kant's diagnosis of social ills and in his prescription for the cure. How often do we neglect to cultivate our own capacity for self-determination and independent thought? How often do we fear the consequences of asking challenging questions and of following the implications of the answers? How much better would our lives be if we were to

heed Kant's advice and refuse to succumb to fear and manipulation? How much better would the world be if we truly lived in an age of enlightenment?

But notice what is missing in Kant's prescription for the cure. Kant limits his vision to the individual, thinking of each person as an independent island without the myriad relationships and ties that together constitute a meaningful life. Perhaps this is due, at least in part, to Kant's own biography. He had few friends, he never married, and he never once in his entire life left his hometown of Königsberg. His life was so regulated by routine and what was probably a case of obsessive compulsive disorder that the townspeople of Königsberg actually set their clocks by Kant's daily walk by their house, because he always walked the same route at the same pace at the same time of day. True story – look it up! For Kant, the ideal human life is one of dispassionate reason, devoid of emotion, adventure, risks, and love: in short, it's missing much of what makes our lives unique and meaningful.

This is not to say that we should dismiss Kant's insights on enlightenment because of these shortcomings. Far from it! Hopefully you have noticed that the fundamental mission of a university education is deeply indebted to Kant's insights. We have taught you from your first day on campus to think for yourselves, to ask challenging questions, to follow the answers wherever they might lead you, to be unafraid in your pursuit of knowledge and wisdom. These are all noble and worthy pursuits! But we're still missing something.

Let's turn now to a very different time and place: India in the 6th century BCE. Surprisingly, what we find is a world not much different from the world into which Kant was born, or even much different from our own world. India at the time was overwhelmed with political infighting and economic corruption, where the weak were oppressed by the strong and where the constant threat of violence kept the masses in a near-perpetual state of fear and despair. Siddhartha Gautama was born a prince of the noble warrior caste. When he was born, his father, the king, summoned wise men to foretell his son's future. The wise men told the king that they foresaw two possible destinies for his son: either he would be the most powerful king the world had ever known, or he would renounce his kingdom and become a great spiritual leader. Siddhartha's father was terrified of the latter possibility, so he did everything in his power to keep Siddhartha from learning anything about the world. He reasoned that if he could keep Siddhartha distracted by all of the sensuous trappings of the life of a prince, he would never contemplate renouncing it all to lead a life in pursuit of spiritual goals.

So Siddhartha grew up in opulent luxury, his every desire fulfilled. But despite his father's best efforts, Siddhartha could not contain his curiosity about the world beyond the palace walls. One day he ordered his servant to sneak him outside the palace to see the world. What he saw became known as the "four great sights," and they forever altered the course of Siddhartha's life. On his journey through the city he saw an old man, a sick man, a dead man, and a monk. For the first time in his life, Siddhartha was confronted with suffering and death. He had no way of processing what he saw, but he could not shake these images and the questions they raised for him. Then and there he determined to renounce his title as prince and set off into the world to understand suffering and death and to find the key to peace and joy. On that fateful first journey he noticed that the only one who seemed to have peace and serenity was the monk, so he decided to take the path of a spiritual seeker. He joined a small group of ascetics and set off on the path

toward enlightenment by following a harsh regimen of depravation and self-inflicted suffering. He went naked, he beat himself, he slept in the rain, he often ate only one grain of rice a day, and he was permanently on the edge of death. But he felt no closer to enlightenment than when he began.

Finally, he decided to sit under a tree to meditate until he discovered the answer to his questions. He would not move from that spot, no matter how long it took. As he sat in meditation, he realized that suffering and death are inevitable, but that they do not have to have the last word. We fear these things even though we will inevitably experience them. The key, he realized, lies in how we approach them. The reason we fear these things is because we cling to life and we refuse to accept that our lives will end. We spend so much time forestalling the inevitable and focusing our energies on things that will not bring us true joy. We seem to be incapable of appreciating the beauty and wonder of the world because we are striving after the wrong goals. Only by letting go of all of our petty desires and attachments can we be truly present in this beautiful world and appreciate it for what it is. Only by living completely in the present and taking each moment for exactly what it is can we attain the final liberation from suffering and death: Nirvana. This was Siddhartha's great insight, and from that moment on he was known as the Buddha, the enlightened one.

But there's another part to the story. Just before he sat down to meditate, a young woman came down to the river by the tree where he was sitting. She was carrying some rice porridge with her and when she noticed how sick and frail Siddhartha looked, she offered him some of her food. In that moment Siddhartha had his second great insight. Wisdom alone is not enough. Achieving our own liberation from suffering and death is not enough. Wisdom must always be yoked with compassion. It is compassion that will ease the suffering of others, it is compassion that will make our own lives meaningful, it is through compassion that we will finally achieve peace and joy.

The Buddha's first sermon focuses on these truths that he discovered. In this sermon he teaches what are known as the Four Noble Truths: 1. To live is to suffer. 2. Suffering is caused by desire. 3. To end suffering, end desire. 4. To end desire, follow the Noble Eightfold Path. The Noble Eightfold Path lays out the process for attaining enlightenment and can be divided into the two complementary approaches of wisdom and compassion. We need both, the Buddha says, to live a meaningful life and to attain enlightenment, not just for ourselves but for all beings.

This union of wisdom and compassion is a central theme of Buddhism in all of its forms. In Mahayana Buddhism, the "Great Vehicle," this union finds its clearest and noblest expression in the Bodhisattva Vow. A bodhisattva is someone who has achieved enlightenment but postpones entering into Nirvana because of a burning desire to help all beings achieve enlightenment. Only after all beings have been enlightened will the bodhisattvas enter Nirvana. I want to read a typical version of the Bodhisattva Vow to show how this union of wisdom and compassion works in practice:

> With a wish to free all beings
> I shall always go for refuge
> To the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha,

Until I reach full enlightenment.
Enthused by wisdom and compassion,
today in the Buddha's presence I generate
the Mind for Full Awakening
For the benefit of all sentient beings.
As long as space remains,
As long as sentient beings remain,
Until then, may I too remain
And dispel the miseries of the world.

For the Buddha, true peace and joy is only possible when all beings also experience true peace and joy. We can't have one without the other. As long as there is ignorance, violence, fear, and suffering, we have work to do. Our enlightenment is always intertwined with our commitment to making the world a better place for all. There is no "I," ultimately, without "us."

So what do Kant and the Buddha have in common? Both insist that the key to a life well-lived is enlightenment. Both emphasize the importance of finding our own way, asking our own questions, thinking for ourselves, and being fearless in the face of a world that often refuses to make sense. Both invite us to do the hard, yet rewarding work of "growing up" (as Kant would say) or of "waking up" (another meaning of the word "Buddha"). Both give us resources to sustain us on our journey toward enlightenment. Kant reminds us that we have been blessed with reason and the ability to think for ourselves, that the world will be a better place when we no longer fear the unknown or submit unquestioningly to authority, but dare to assert our intellectual independence and discover the truth for ourselves. The Buddha reminds us that wisdom is necessary but insufficient, that the world will only be improved when we use our hard-won wisdom to give ourselves completely to others in compassion and love, that my own enlightenment is only possible when all have been enlightened, that we are all in this together.

So as you approach the end of your time at Butler, I hope you will realize that the most important lessons you have learned here are not about getting the right answers or finally holding that piece of paper on Commencement Day, but about developing the capacity to think for yourself, to pursue wisdom, to cultivate compassion, and to find meaning and joy in embracing and loving this big, messy, beautiful world.